There's millions of us now and there'll be millions more tomorrow !

Short notes to a feasibly absent self about some William A. Wellman movies.

Must have been the « Midnight cinéma » on the 3rd channel, an obvious pick. One night Patrick Brion showed « Beggars of life » and « Wild boys of the road ». Many sundays after it was « Frisco Jenny » and after that I was pretty done. I can't quite remember when I first saw « Safe in hell » or « Other men's women ». I just saw that the mark was unereasable.

Keep it in mind : even if I'm aware to the fact Wellman made films for money and had his golden era, between '28 and '34, that does not mean all of his stuff is deserving to be carved in marble. Even for his golden years of 32 & 33, he had quite a few well... not exactly stinkers, but films that stand just not « So big » (pun intented). Wellman was always a puzzle and puzzles are always easy : it's just that your mind has not yet arrived to its conclusions.

I'm tending to think this begins with « Beggars of life » with this trend of representing hobos hopping up on trains, and going to find a new life wherever and however they can. These people have endured gales, devastated crops, famine and a harsh future, and often have no other choice than to escape. The harsh and somewhat rewarding nature of the land offers expectations, at other times there are none.

Maybe « So big » is the most optimistic of all even if the film is hardly understandable at first sight. Why ? Easy as shit, it's a version of « L'éducation sentimentale » just as « I am a fugitive from a chain gang » is an adaptation from « Les misérables ». But quite more friendly : as least Selena's deadbeat dad who can't provide her a future has the grace to die in the first reel, she has the luck to land in a plantation of cabbages, vegetables she laughs at in the first place, and a kid called Rolf throws a tantrum for showing he's not in love with her whom he absolutely loves and she will have a husband and will be dareful (« asparagus ! »). Frightully enough I knew a young guy looking a honest 80 % like Rolf who always behind my back. I won't betray the ending of the movie, but the most happens in « white cases », just like « L'éducation sentimentale ». This has nothing of the common rewarding stuff : the pace is tight, you don't recognize people one time from the other. But in the end there's a feeling all has been accomplished, and « che sera, sera, what will be, will be. »

« Night nurse » is not very different. It is a bit more upbeat and has the same kind of « fake happy ending ». Barbara Stanwyck is one of the many « lost girls » in Wellman's movies of this era (wonder how he got some sleep) but she's not that

« lost ». In fact she turns day to night into a prominent « night nurse » (hence the title) and has also a taste of integrity when she decides that she definitely has to help two starving kids in order to escape her deadbeat mom and her gangster comrades. If the way she helps resolving the problem is seen by you as « moral » or « not moral » it is definitely beyond my radar.

And then there's « Other men's women » which makes me think of « La bête humaine ». Hard to fathom how the first 9 minutes were exactly shot « Have a chew on me ! » but it's typical of Wellman in this area. The moment you tell « Wait a minute » you're already taken down by the charm of the global thing. Which does not mean « Other men's women » is Wellman's most charming film, not at all- it's just about people trying to get a decent- and if possibly peaceful- life but the moment they install it they've already gone. To where, to what, who cares ? « Other men's women » may not be Wellman's most peaceful movie, it's probably one with the best intentions- but best intentions don't make good deeds, or wiser, or better people.

If « Night nurse » is definitely positive (but with Wellman we have to take caution with these words), « Safe in Hell » might be his total opposite. That's the problem with these movies of Wellman in this era : we tend to think characters are blank maps on a translucent globe but then they react (more often then they ACT). If the character in « Night nurse » is a « clever lost girl », then the one in « Safe in Hell » must be the opposite. In fact « Safe in Hell » may seem a nasty flick because of the way it depicts not only women, or even the Pre Code, but the moral garnett these women were under. As Elvis Costello sang, « I can't forgive you for things you haven't done yet ». As ever the plot is overtly simple, but the plans are quick, the leading lady ever gracious (more than graceful) but her best judgement is yet to come. Not all of her ducks are in the same row but at the same time she realises prostitution is worse than death so she walks to the gallows quick with absolutely no regret. Maybe it's a Bresson movie years before his prime, and why the hell would it be a problem ?

But these remarks are judgemental, which Wellman makes us quickly forget. It's hard to tell from his characters because they are a not kind of « shoo bah hoo, how d'you do ? » even if they a have a tendency to make you think so. For the first plans of his movies I mention, there's an undeniable atmosphere of grey and rust and lost people and lousy chances of escape and y'know what ? Sometimes works. But, as in an old ABBA song, the more chances you take, the deeper you dig your own grave. The thrill of the chance makes it all the worse « Oh come on, sod it, might have been worse somehow ». Other films have braided hairs of innocent little girls in the case of « The grass is greener in the next state ! ». Only Wellman deals with maps and knows that to get from point A to point B that'll take a lot of trouble.

The youth of « Wild boys of the road » can't take no chance of illness and not another chance of health either. They just got away from home and hopped on trains

in order to not be a burden to their parents. But even then, no good will be done, they're either delinquants or frauds. Seems like that country can't raise its own offspring. I can't betray the storyline of the story, or how this, and how do you look at that : it's not an easy film but filmed in the most simple way. It's anarchy made for public theaters, in Roosevelt's « Good deal » America.

No luck either for the anti-heroes of « Heroes for sale ». It's a wonder to my eyes such an absolute poison to the minds could be released (or at least financed) by the wealth-greedy eyes of a mogul. The more the heroes travel- and boy they never rest themselves in this movie- the more they get nowhere. The more they do, the less they achieve. The traitor and his victim meet far from their milk and honey mama's welcoming homes to share the same vibe « This is the end of America ! ». No, this was not the end, but the worse would be licking their treshold anytime soon- if they still had one, which isn't the case.

Won't fare much better for « Frisco Jenny ». Her dedication to her city isn't wild enough, and maybe she should have travelled, but she can't escape it, for more than one reason I won't explicit. First time I saw that, I just thought « Oh no... oh why the... Oh I would do the same thing as you... ». I understand this has to be melodrama, and once again it is hard to know what its characters are standing for. Stupid or plain unconscious ? Too clever for their own good ? Victims of the circumstances ? And what if we gave a shit ? Well we do because we fell in love with the characters.

In my opinion « Stingaree » is a kind of an upbeat movie (but one you could sense in Wellman had already given up and started to cash the paychecks). It begins like so many of his by a haphazard scene you'll never be able to figure out. And then everything lights up, you get to have a good laugh and tell yourself « Awc'm'on, old hoss... that reason's above me ».

As Wellman answered in an interview to the question :
« Why did you make those movies ? »
« Money».
« What's your definition of a bad movie ? »
« A lot of mine ».